Quest for Identity in Diasporic Literature: In Kiran Desai’s “The Inheritance of Loss”

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ABSTRACT:

A Diaspora is a massive organization of humans with a similar heritage or homeland who have in view that moved out to places all over the world. Over the previous few years there has been a proliferation of literature over the country of Diaspora. The experience of exile, the tendency to do not forget the past may set off an ambivalence, which in flip determines type of writing that transcends geographical and national literature. Such return to the beginning is symbolic representation of desire, memory, myth, seek and discovery which cultivates the feel of cultural identification inside the Diaspora writers. Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai aren't any exceptions to the set norm however what ranks them above different writers of exile is their metaphysical union with the concept. A Modest strive is being made on this paper to delve deep into the difficulty of migration and to give the pain, problems & trauma faced by way of the immigrants with the aid of comparing the topic of diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesh and Kiran Desai’s Inheritance of loss.

Keywords: Alienation, Identity, Illegal Immigrants, Disillusionment & Acculturation

INTRODUCTION:

The term diaspora comes from an ancient Greek word meaning “to scatter about” And that’s exactly what the people of a diaspora do they scatter from their homeland to places across the globe spreading their culture as they go. A diaspora is a large group of people with a similar heritage or homeland who have since moved out to places all over the world. The term of diaspora’s definition is also debatable. Now I will discuss about the diaspora from my perspective. Safran defines six basic characteristics in his definition of diaspora. According to him, for something to be called as diaspora there should be a dispersal from homeland to two or more foreign regions; those people who are away from their homeland have a collective memory about their homeland; they have a belief that they will always be outrageous in their host state; they idealize their putative ancestral home; there is a belief that all members of that society should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of the homeland and a strong ethnic group consciousness with a belief in a common fate (Safran, 1991). Cohen adopts Safran’s definition with four additional features which he believes; diaspora should also include scattering groups with aggressive or voluntary purposes; a strong tie to the past or a block to assimilate; diasporas should be defined positively rather than negatively; people of diaspora have also a common identity with co-ethnic members in other countries such as colonial settlers, overseas students, refugees, and economic migrants (Cohen, 1995). Reis explains diaspora formation in three critical historical phases which are the classical period with Ancient Greek, Jewish and Armenian Diasporas; the contemporary period with African diaspora and economic migrants; and the late modern period with a much wider range of diasporic communities and diverse reasons for dispersal for voluntary or involuntary dispersal (Reis, 2004).

Clifford criticizes Safran. He argues that the Jewish diaspora do not have his last three features. For him, Diasporas should have borders. Tribal people (Clifford, 1994) should define them against the norms of nation-states and indigenous claims. Lastly, Brubaker discusses the proliferation of diaspora as a term with a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space (Brubaker, 2005). For him, there should be criteria
to define diaspora. These criteria are dispersion; homeland orientation; and boundary maintenance in order not to be confused in the blooming of Diasporas (Brubaker, The 'diaspora' diaspora, 2005).

I personally think that the basic characters Safran attributes to diaspora define diaspora and diasporic people the best people the best because this definition is closer to the reality. Although some of the people are assimilated in their host country, like Brubaker says they have oriented to their host country, they shouldn’t be counted as diasporic people as he argues. Nevertheless, none of these definitions are universally accepted and are debatable as I said. Consequently, what I do is to interpret this phenomenon from my own perspective.

**DISCUSSION:**

**The Loss of Identity:**

The way it travels through generations as a sense of loss. The novel also talks about exile, immigration, Diasporic displacement & globalization. How people from the 3rd world move to developed countries for making face prejudices from multicultural societies living abroad. They never feel at home in a foreign land and emptiness prevails through their consciousness.

The Inheritance of Loss is set partly in Indian City Kalimpong of West Bengal and partly in the USA in New York with some flashbacks from England. Desai describes it as a book that “tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and What it means to be an Immigrant,” and goes on to say that it also explores at a deeper level, “what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West”- which happened during the British colonial days in India, and is happening again with India’s new relationship with the States.

Inheritance of Loss has expounded basically two categories of women; one denotes the rustic, illiterate class and second educated and urban ladies. Nimi represents first category and Noni and Lola second, first is shown as subjugated by the patriarchal setup whereas second exhibits life of liberation and meaning. The novelist has touched three generations to depict the odyssey of women from subjugation to liberation. Very skilfully Desai has described that seeking promising career people drifts to England, Europe, USA, London etc. but under the multiculturalism they start to loss their own culture. The best example of such character is Jemubhai, who suffers lots in England. He is humiliated and oppressed there but he always hides his embarrassment behind a facade of “keeping up standards” (119). While fact reveals that he marries Nimi only for financial support to go abroad. So their marriage was negotiated to incur a sumptuous dowry:

The dowry included cash, gold, emeralds from Venezuela, rubies from Burma, uncut kundan diamond, a watch on a watch chain, lengths of woollen cloth for her new husband to make into suits in which to travel to England, and in a crisp envelop, a ticket for passage on Strathnaver from Bombay to Liverpool.(91)

He does not love her wife as she is unable to learn English and he considers English speaking persons are epitome of the sophisticated class. Nimi is victim of patriarchal system. She has lost her self, even her previous name Bela is changed to discard the fragrance of backwardness. She is rechristened Nimi by her husband’s family. Nimi was the name of a rich man’s daughter who supplies everything to army. She is not welcomed in her laws’ house and Jemubhai leaves her when she was not acquainted with them properly. She is projected as a traditional wife for whom husband is everything. With him his wife’s life starts and ends too. But husband does not feel any hitch to torture his wife under many illusions. Jemubhai returns home after many years and he has imbibed western hypocrisy and the notion of privacy. When he sees the silly behaviours of his wife he could not control himself and bursts on her caring little about her feeling. His blows become intolerable to her but she doesn’t revolt till her last patience. Their marital relationship is not satisfactory as he detests all creatures who as Indians as they are not taken as civilized. His fear, hate and ill treatment of his wife is the result of disintegration of the self under the influence of colonialism.

In the life of Nimi deprivation, injustice, oppression, alienation and isolation are well discernible. It can be stated that she is completely tied with above. She cannot evade far away. Nimi’s character is projected through the lens of recollection of her anglophile husband. Nimi is example which shows how the traditional women are bound to suffer bitter treatment in the name of husband. Obviously this is the lot of average traditional Indian wives. Having no other options Nimi endures and suffers all maltreatment of her husband without little revolt. Judge abuses her as he considers her illiterate, filthy and uncivilized who cannot learn English. With no knowledge of English she is considered that she will be the cause of disgrace to him. Seeing her filthy and unmannered etiquette he loses his control, and she is being
insulted treated like animal. Very apt illustration will be suitable to cite here that is incident of her footprint on toilet. He discovers that her footprint on the toilet seat, he lost sense and his rage knows no bound: “She was squatting on it! - he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl...” (173). Series of such types of incidents shatter her dream and illusion. She lost her sense of wellbeing. On the trivial issues he creates the fuss and this is because of his segregation from his own culture. He does not like any disturbance in his personal life; he does not allow even her wife who gives a strong financial support to make his career. On other occasion when Nimi went to a meeting of Nehru and was recognized by Jemibhai’s boss, he could not digest this and feels very insulted. He takes it that having been acquainted with his wife he would think awkward about him and his all ways of the promotion will be closed. Consequently he kicks and thrashes her blue and black. To get rid of her he could not help him thinking to kiss her: “In purest mom...ent he could imagine himself killing her” (305). Being a woman she suffers all as she is ready to get all blows given by her husband and never opens her mouth against him. She is sent to Gujarat and there she takes the shelter in her uncle house but even there she is not permitted to stay more.

Alienation:

The novel is set in India and the U.S.A. The retired Judge Jemubhai Popatlal Patel lives with her granddaughter Sai and his cook Panna Lal in Cho Oyu, a crumbling house in Kalimpong, which is located at the foothills of the Himalayas. The geographical location itself reflects alienation in the family and its inhabitants. “They (the Judge and Sai) sipped and ate, all of existence passed over by nonexistence, the gate leading nowhere, and they watched the tea spill copious ribbony curls of vapor, watched their breath join the mist slowly twisting and turning, twisting and turning.” (4) The barrenness is also evident when the author says, “Time might have died in the house that sat on the mountain ledge, its lines, grown distinct with moss, its roof loaded with ferns.” (17) The judge Jemubhai Patel goes to Cambridge in pre-colonial times (in 1939). He is from a remote place called Piphit where the benches on the railway platform are labelled “Indians only” and “Europeans only.” His father sends him to England because he feels his son going abroad takes them up the social ladder. Ironically the Judge’s father earns his livelihood by procuring false witnesses in courts. Jemubhai goes one month after his marriage and he has not even examined his wife’s face. He boards the ship at Bombay. The author remarks, “Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn’t adulterated by another, contradictory emotion.” (37)

The Judge has reverence for the Queen before going to England, but experiences humiliation in London. He cannot face the oppression by the colonizers. He becomes aloof and withdraws. To escape from the loneliness, he focuses exceptionally on his studies. “He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow.” (39) For days together no one speaks to them. He is insulted by the young girls saying that he stinks of curry and he washes himself obsessively. He hesitates even to smile as it will highlight his lips and gums which are Indian. Eventually he barely feels human at all. His education in England makes him decultured and makes him a man with intellect but not a warm heart. His futile attempts to fit into the alien culture make him emotionally barren and spiritually dead. He cannot treat anyone from his father to his cook affectionately. He even loses the basic human ability of communication. He finds solace in the company of his dog Mutt. He was torn apart by the memories of his past and even his Calmopse cannot give him sleep. After his education he becomes a member of the ICS and is posted in Uttar Pradesh. Later he is posted in West Bengal. He directs his frustration towards all Indians and especially towards his wife because he is a product of a male chauvinistic society. He treats his wife most inhumanely, abuses her physically and finally deserts her for no fault of hers. He felt his wife too uncivilized to be taken to official parties. Thus the Judge’s wife who has really provided financial assistance for the Judge to go abroad is double-alienated-once as an Indian at the hands of the British and then at the hands of her husband. Only after he lost his Mutt he wondered “if he had killed his wife, for the sake of false ideals. Stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers, turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation...” (308) He feels compunction over being violent and inhuman to his wife.
CONCLUSION:
The Author says created the characters with traits existentialism like alienation, quest and conflict. She very powerfully delineates the feeling of rootlessness that has started in the colonial times. She also depicts how this sense of loss has been inherited to the succeeding generations and how it has robbed their lives of the very pleasure of human existence. She also brings home the point how the struggle for existence in the era of globalization alienates the people. Biju, the Cook’s son re-joins his father and though he loses his hard-earned money he gets the long sought after love. The author gives an optimistic hint that Gyan comes back to Sai with Mutt, the Judge’s dog. Thus the author suggests that the Loss will not be inherited to the next generations.

REFERENCES:


